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SUBJECT: INFANT FORMULA AND THE PDS IN BASRAH GOVERNORATE

SUMMARY

¶11. UNICEF recently released a policy paper recommending that infant formula be immediately deleted from the OFF general ration. The following report summarizes information gathered by the DART from WFP local female staff, home interviews, and IDP interviews in Basrah Governorate between 4 and 11 May. Although a more thorough investigation of the use of infant formula is necessary in Basrah and other Iraqi governorates, the issues raised during interviews indicate to the DART that the risks involved in removing this commodity from the OFF general food ration for children under one year of age cannot be justified prior to the establishment of a functioning maternal and child safety net and health education program. End Summary

USE OF INFANT FORMULA

¶12. Basrah is Iraq's second largest city, with an estimated population of 1.2 million people. The population of Basrah governorate is estimated at 1.8 million. Although overall rates of exclusive breastfeeding in Iraq increased during the sanctions period (from 17 percent to 30 percent), interviews of U.N. World Food Program (WFP) local staff who have sampled Basrah's urban and rural populations indicate that there is significant variance in the rates of breastfeeding between rural and urban and uneducated versus educated women. WFP indicates that there is almost universal breastfeeding in rural areas of Basrah governorate, while in the city more than 75 percent of women bottle-feed for at least a portion of an infant's first year.

¶13. According to WFP, bottle-feeding is particularly common to women working outside the home, even though most women are provided six months to a year of maternity leave after giving birth. Bottle-feeding among working and educated women appears to be largely a matter of preference.

¶14. In interviews with poorer women, and with internally displaced persons (IDPs) in Al Zubayr, bottle-feeding was linked to a mother's perception that her own milk supply was insufficient. Among the seven IDP families interviewed by the DART, three reported using infant formula (IF) because their own milk was insufficient, with two of these estimated that they did not eat enough to be able to produce milk. A fourth indicated that she was on medication, and was worried that the drug would pass to her baby if she tried to nurse.

¶15. All women indicated that they used either bottled or boiled water to prepare IF, and in the absence of refrigeration, discarded any milk that was not consumed immediately. However, when asked how bottles were cleaned, it became apparent that a significant risk of contamination of the IF was common to these women. Bottles are washed in unsafe water with other household dishes, and they are not dried thoroughly prior to use. When asked whether diarrhea or other digestive complaints were common to their infants, three of the seven reported that their infants currently had diarrhea and vomiting.

¶16. One infant, six days old, whose mother had reported having very little breast-milk and insufficient food for herself, was clearly dehydrated. This particular family grouping (one male, two females, and four children) was the most needy of the IDPs visited in Al Zubayr, with malnutrition apparent in three of the four children (one with oedema), and respiratory infections in two of these

three. When asked why the children had not been taken to the hospital or clinic, the mother reported that they did not have the money. Other IDP families living in the same building had provided some IF and other commodities to this family, but supplies among this group were obviously limited. WFP's partner for vulnerable group and IDP feeding in Basra governorate will coordinate with IOM to provide these families assistance.

17. For those who can afford to buy IF, it is available in local markets. Pre-war market prices for IF in Basra city ranged from 450 to 500 Iraqi dinars for 450 grams. By contrast, the PDS food ration is 250 dinars per person. Post-war prices stand at 1,400 to 1,500 Iraqi dinar. Three percent of women receiving IF report selling it. The most common reason for sale is to purchase a different brand of formula. WFP reports that brands and respective quantities of half-fat and whole-fat IF have varied from distribution to distribution. Mothers report that the variation causes diarrhea and other digestive disorders in their infants, so if previously distributed brands are available on the market, they will sell or swap newly distributed brands and/or formulations.

AVAILABILITY OF INFANT FORMULA AND OTHER USES

18. The United Nations Children's Fund (UNICEF) recently released a policy paper, following a meeting in Amman, that recommends the immediate deletion of IF from the Oil for Food (OFF) general ration. Approximately 20 percent of Iraq's total estimated IF requirements would continue to be imported under OFF for distribution through medical centers and UNICEF's Targeted Nutrition Program. The policy paper cites the monthly distribution of double rations since November as evidence that sufficient quantities of IF have been distributed to last through August. In their planning framework, this date would provide UNICEF and its partners ample time to establish/re-establish a nutritional safety-net for mothers and infants. The plan includes the provision of IF only when medically prescribed and otherwise removes IF from the OFF food basket immediately. WFP local staff strongly disagree with this analysis for the following reasons:

-- Not enough weaning cereals and powdered milk were distributed before the war. Distribution of powdered milk has ranged from 13 percent to 25 percent of a full ration since the "April-May" distributions, and was not complete in earlier distributions. In many cases, IF has been used to supplement the lack of powdered milk. (Note: Powdered milk is one of the most valued commodities in the OFF food basket because it is the sole "breakfast" commodity. WFP staff from all southern governorates indicate powdered milk provides urban families their primary source of yogurt-a staple in the Iraqi diet. End Note.) Staff report that in urban areas particularly, where other options for the procurement of milk are limited, mothers have been using/purchasing IF to complement the diets of weaning-age and older children.

-- WFP staff report that when a child is born, it can take from two to four months for him or her to be registered in the PDS system. This means that families with children born since January are unlikely to have received infant formula during the multi-month distributions provided in January, February, or March. With the interruption of the PDS registration and tracking systems, this trend is likely to continue for several more months. Under these circumstances, families with an excess of IF will give IF to families with unregistered infants, either through sale or exchange. Further, WFP staff doubt that existing stores will meet even minimum requirements through June.

-- WFP monthly monitoring post-distribution prior to the conflict consistently indicated that the OFF food basket provided families between 20 to 25 days of their monthly food requirements. WFP staff indicate that the war, and the assumption of power by Coalition forces, has raised hopes that the ration will be increased. Deleting any item from the food basket now risks being interpreted as disregard for the Iraqi people by the Coalition, and deleting something that is considered to be necessary will generate even more distrust of Iraq's interim administration. WFP points to the last time an attempt was made to remove IF from the food basket, and the politicized debate it caused as evidence that the issue is too sensitive to approach now as a unilateral policy decision.

(Comment: The first two reasons above question the assumption that previously distributed quantities of IF will tide over bottle-fed infants over until August, and they underscore the importance of ensuring that viable alternatives and assistance exist for Iraqi women PRIOR to the removal of IF from the OFF basket. The third reason, while meaningless in the analysis of the benefits of breast

feeding over bottle feeding, is certainly relevant to attempts to reestablish the PDS as a way of providing the population a sense of stability and security during this uncertain time. It also highlights the necessity of ensuring a "fit" between sectoral programmatic decisions and the political realities of a volatile environment for which they are being made. End Comment.)

RECOMMENDATION

19. Given the considerations above, the DART strongly recommends that WFP attempt to ensure that 100 percent of the IF ration is included in the OFF food basket throughout the planned EMOP program period (September).

JONES